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Postmodernism and the individual as a process

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Postmodern Moments in Modern Economics. By David F. Ruccio and Jack Amariglio. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003.

I previously argued that neoclassicism, despite its self-congratulatory pose as the only defender of the individual in economics, has in fact finally succeeded in eliminating the individual from its own discourse (Davis [2003](#)). An atomistic individual can only be defined in terms of its own characteristics, and a natural basis for this are what might be thought of as the “purely private” psychological features of the individual, aka tastes/preferences. But in neoclassicism's century-long unthinking march on the road to its current full-blown scientism, even the individual's “purely private” psychological characteristics have been deemed unscientific, indeed so much so that the ordinalist revolutionaries of the 1930s, led by Lionel Robespierre (also known as the Canonizer), who had thought their victory sealed in repudiating cardinalism's dangerous interpersonal utility comparisons doctrine, shortly thereafter found themselves victims of the Samuelsonian Thermidor of revealed preference. Thus, if the basis of the atomistic individual was its inner life, and that inner life is now black-boxed into non-existence, then it follows that this neoclassical individual also ceases to exist. Ruccio and Amariglio remind us of

Samuelson's maxim that economics advances funeral by funeral ([2003](#), p. 54). But little did we know that economics' advance involved one big funeral that would leave planet mainstream economics entirely lifeless!

Where are we to begin, then, in repopulating this world left to us by neoclassicism as a primitive monument to scientism? For Ruccio and Amariglio ([2003](#)), scientism is a species of modernism, which denies the world is irredeemably marked by uncertainty and ambiguity, and claims that its form is essentially rational. To have knowledge of such a world, individuals must be unified single agents. That is, the subject must be "centered" to even be an agent. Consequently, should we reject both scientism and its modernist basis, it follows that we must also abandon the unified agent and centered subject for a "decentered subject." It is the decentered subject, accordingly, that must repopulate our barren mainstream world, and our task is then to get to know this new individual. As it turns out, close kin to this individual in the form of individuals with multiple utility functions attempted a visit to planet mainstream many years ago, but were summarily shunned and expelled, because they were not thought to fit in very well. Perhaps this was just as well, since the decentered subjects Ruccio and Amariglio ([2003](#)) describe do not have utility functions, certainly not multiple utility functions, although they do have something like multiple selves, because they "occupy so many different positions and hold such a bewildering variety of perspectives that stable and commensurable knowledge [associated with being a single centered subject] is seen as impossible" ([2003](#): 15). Further, whereas the multiple utility function idea foundered on its inability to explain the unity of the individual, Ruccio and Amariglio ([2003](#)) have no intention of re-centering the decentered individual as some new kind of unity. When they speak of the fragmentation of the subject, they mean it. Individuals come to pieces; or rather subjects are variously "situated" and correspondingly have local knowledge about their experiences, which on the whole does not travel well.

In my own discussion of an alternative to the atomistic individual conception, I suggested something quite like their idea of a situated subject in saying that individuals should be seen as socially embedded (Davis [2003](#)). Ruccio and Amariglio ([2003](#)) are not unwelcoming to this idea, but challenge me to "explore another postmodern possibility, of moving beyond the individual subject and rethinking the economy as a 'process without a subject'" (p. 297n). I believe they indeed put their finger on an important problem concerning how one is to speak of embedded or situated individuals as single individuals that is not easily resolved, and which is arguably one of the most important problems we face today in a world in which identity politics frames not only thinking about individuals but also about the coherence of contemporary society. An especially forceful dimension of their view, and one often underestimated by many of their commentators, lies in their emphasis on the human body. An easy skeptical ploy is to say: "The body?! Of course people have bodies. The reason the body is not part of economics is that everyone knows this, and it doesn't make any difference to economics." But Ruccio and Amariglio's ([2003](#)) point about the importance of the body is that it implies that the individual must always be somewhere, or, conversely, that the individual can never be nowhere. So, over time, individuals occupy a succession of specific locations and perspectives, each of which tends to have its own singularity in terms of individual experience and action. Mainstream economics avoids admitting individuals have this multi-stage character by restricting itself to formalist modes of analysis that create abstract individuals, and then runs these poor little abstract individuals through their nowhere mathematical paces. Thus, conveniently, the issue of the fragmentation of the individual cannot even arise, which is as one would expect, Ruccio and Amariglio ([2003](#)) would remind us, in a discourse, that is essentialist and transcendent in nature.¹

But while we agree that modernism entails the elimination of the individual, I do not follow Ruccio and Amariglio ([2003](#)) in thinking that a postmodern view of the economy should be seen as a "process without a subject." Instead I recommend a view for economics that might be termed "the subject as a process," and treat this as a type of socially embedded or situated individual conception. Let me frame this in terms of the idea behind Ruccio and Amariglio's title, *Postmodern Moments in Modern Economics*. As they tell us, their focus is upon postmodern moments *within* modernism and *within* the modernist world we occupy. That is, they

acknowledge that our world is organized in terms of sets of modernist structures, but deny this modernist project can ever be fully pulled off—with respect to the individual or anything else. From this perspective, it seems, if we are to properly understand individuals, we ought to think of them in terms of their postmodern moments—or, I prefer, postmodern processes that operate within modernist structures that define individuality.

First, then, let us distinguish the modernist structure of individuality associated with individuals' many individual identity representations as have been socially constructed and historically accumulated over centuries, in order to characterize, manage, organize, and coordinate large populations of individuals, as reflected in the many different ways in which individuals are classified in social group taxonomies by social scientists, public authorities, and in the many forms of social discourse. These different individual identities should be seen as “object” identities, because they treat individuals as things or members of groups or categories rather than as subjects. Consider a sample of the different social grounds for the constitution of individuals' various object identities in the contemporary world: tax and social contribution requirements, legal responsibility determination, market contract compliance, pension and social services delivery, medical treatment, credit rating, rights elaboration, education and training evaluation, birth and death verification, experimental investigation, and so on in an essentially unbounded list. Each constructs one form of individual identity by ascribing membership to individuals according to whether they can be assigned the characteristics appropriate to the categories created to represent different social group aggregates. Further, corresponding to these different forms of individual identity, there exists a variety of “continuity” tracking technologies used to operationalize these different individual identities in light of the constant change in individuals' many characteristics: names, number assignments, individualized records of all kinds, family descent, curriculum vitae, personnel files, photographs, biometric measures (fingerprints, DNA identification, dental records, brain scans, iris scans), surveillance, and incarceration or institutionalization. As social group categories are tools used for the management of large heterogeneous populations of individuals according to functional relationships believed to obtain between and within groups of individuals, the use of these tools requires there to be practical working systems for their consistent application. Efficiency in this regard is a matter of being able to consistently apply a given category to individuals as long as they satisfy the requirements of the category over time—a matter not always easy to determine when many individual characteristics undergo change.

Second, let us distinguish as a postmodern process at the heart of this modernist ordering individuals' constant effort to negotiate the competing and often conflicting different individual identities they find assigned to them. That is, just as social processes construct different categories of individual identity in order to organize large numbers of disparate individuals, so individuals construct their own personal identities by the ways they organize their multiple individual identities. Note, however, that this process concept of personal identity is fundamentally different in nature from the modernist individual identity concept. Our many individual identity concepts in the modern world tend to be stable and are largely unrelated to one another,² whereas individuals' efforts to manage the competing requirements of their various individual identities is a process constantly changing with respect to how these individual identities are assembled and organized, and moreover is a process that is on the whole oriented toward relating these many individual identities to one another in some more or less coherent way.³ Personal identity thus understood as a kind of “self”-creation process does not fit very comfortably with the standard meaning of the concept of identity, where that idea is associated with some kind of enduring sameness. Nor does it fit very well with most discussions of personal identity in the philosophy literature, which make the same underlying assumption.⁴ I, however, retain the concept of personal identity on the grounds that the process of managing many competing individual identities is one in which a fragmented “individuality” is seen as a single individuality, if a nonetheless changing one. Or, to put it somewhat differently, since the concept of personal identity understood as a process permits a subject concept of the individual along

side modernism's object concept of the individual, modernism's (and neoclassicism's) abandonment of the individual as a subject itself produces a postmodern retrieval of the individual as a subject.

The “subject as a process” idea, or the idea of a fragmented “individuality” seen as a single individuality, contrary to what might be imagined, is a well established idea in social psychology research and literature in the form of the view that personal identity is a self-produced narrative identity. Recent examples over a variety of domains include Atkins' Continental philosophy approach drawing on Ricoeur (Atkins [2004](#)), Schechtman's critique of mainstream philosophy psychological continuity theories (Schechtman [1996](#)), Phillips on psychopathology (Phillips [2003](#)), Radden's treatment of personality (Radden [1996](#)), Dennett's cognitive science dispositions view of the individual (Dennett [1992](#)), and Ross' game-theoretic account of individuals' multiple selves (Ross [2005](#)). Bruner's narrative construction of reality approach is an important source for many (Bruner [1991](#), [1992](#)). Here I cannot further discuss how this approach may apply to economic life or address its complexity. The Arab-French novelist Maalouf gives us one sense of the latter in describing an individual who before the recent Balkan war called himself a Yugoslavian, during the war called himself a Muslim, and after the war called himself a Bosnian (Maalouf [1998](#): 12). To label and re-label yourself in this way as this person does is paradoxically a matter of how the individual chooses a succession of imposed or given individual identities (in the form of membership in national, religious, and ethnic categories, that is, as the individual's social identities). That individuals do this—or when they are able to do so—seems to be a matter of the accounts they provide about how they have done so.

Thus, rather than see the economy as a “process without a subject” we might think of “the subject as a process,” and the social embeddedness or situatedness of individuals in economic life as reflecting a tension between two dimensions of identity outlined above. Ruccio and Amariglio close *Postmodern Moments* with a play on the Samuelsonian maxim about progress in economics by commenting that “the postmodern moments of modern economics may represent nothing more than a row freshly dug graves” (p. 300). But I think they offer more when they ask us to situate the decentered subject. For them, that individual must always be somewhere. It is our task to find out where.

Notes

1 Their argument about the body is similar to the Santa Fe complexity theory critiques of neoclassical economics, which begin from a parallel premise that the space of the economy is non-Euclidian and everywhere differentiated. Most complexity approach reasoning in economics, however, employs agent-based modeling, and thus finesses the issue Ruccio and Amariglio raise (for example, Potts [2000](#); see Davis forthcoming).

2 For example, your doctor's records of your individual health identity are largely unrelated to your tax or social security individual identity.

3 A “modernist” moment within a postmodern process!

4 Most of the literature on personal identity in philosophy takes the view that personal identity requires some kind of enduring sameness. An exception is Schechtman, who explicitly criticizes this perspective for reasons similar to the argument here, but who does not connect her view to the issue of modernism (1996).

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